

Committee on Resources

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Testimony of Thomas A. Hook

Before: The Committee on Resources, Subcommittee on Fisheries and Conservation, Wildlife & Oceans

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Representing: The Friends of Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge

Cambridge, Maryland

My name is Tom Hook, I am the volunteer Treasurer for the Friends of Blackwater, a position I have held for over 5 years. I would like to thank the Committee for this opportunity to speak this morning in support of H.R. 2408, the extension of the National Wildlife Refuge System Volunteer and Community Partnership Enhancement Act of 1998.

WHO WE ARE & WHAT WE DO

The Friends of Blackwater is a tax-exempt 501 c (3) organization of over 800 members from across the United States and Canada. Chartered in 1987, the Friends of Blackwater is an official "cooperating association" authorized by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.

In 2003, the Friends of Blackwater received the prestigious "Friends Group of the Year" award from the National Wildlife Refuge Association.

The mission of the Friends of Blackwater is:

"To support the purposes of the Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge by working for the protection, preservation, and enhancement of these precious lands through advocacy, environmental education and outreach".

In carrying out this mission, the Friends of Blackwater volunteers:

- Conduct educational Programs for elementary, middle and high school students,
- Serve as docents and contact sources for the Visitors Center,
- Conduct three educational "Open House" events each year directed at children, and support the annual "Kid's Fishing Derby",
- Operate the Visitors Center bookstore, one of the best stocked wildlife bookstores on the Eastern Shore,
- Conduct refuge orientation programs and guided tours,
- Assist refuge management in biological studies, forest management projects, and forest restoration,
- Conduct guided bird tours,
- Apply for grants and raise funds and undertake major projects to enhance the educational and recreational assets of the refuge. Examples include:
 - Improving and replacing exhibits at the Visitors Center,
 - Constructing a new photo blind and observation deck,
 - Installing and operating an osprey cam on the Internet,

- Planning and constructing over 20 miles of paddling trails, and
- Planning and constructing over 4 miles of new hiking trails,
- Working with the Dorchester County Department of Tourism to install and operate a tourist information radio station that broadcasts 24 hours a day,
- Participating in and coordinating major wetland restoration projects on the refuge. Congressman Gilchrest and his staff were volunteers for the Barren Island marsh restoration project, and
- Supporting the refuge staff in data entry, refuge maintenance, and special projects.

While funding for these projects comes from grants, donations from the community, funds raised by the Friends through its fundraising activities, and partnerships with others, these efforts are conducted with volunteer management and support. In 2002, volunteers contributed over 19,000 hours of volunteer support to the Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge. That is the equivalent of over 9 full-time employees.

WHY ARE VOLUNTEERS IMPORTANT?

Without the time and efforts contributed by the Friends of Blackwater volunteers, refuge management would have no choice but to forgo most if not all of the projects I just outlined.

This would mean:

- There would be fewer and less valuable educational programs, fewer or no bird tours, fewer or no school orientation programs,
- The Visitors Center would be staffed by docents much less of the time, thus denying the public much of the valuable educational experience of the refuge,
- There would be fewer recreational facilities and opportunities like the photo blind, paddling trails and hiking trails,
- Less marsh and wetland restoration,
- Refuge staff would not have the behind-the-scenes support for their never-ending task of refuge maintenance, biological studies, forest management and restoration, and special projects.

Most importantly the public would be denied the rich diversity of the educational and recreational experiences the Blackwater Refuge has to offer.

THE VALUE OF VOLUNTEER COORDINATORS

Blackwater is not the only refuge with a Friends Group or a Cooperating Association. There are over 230 such volunteer groups across the nation supporting the refuge system.

One of the most important volunteer jobs in the Friends Group is that of Volunteer Coordinator. This is a time consuming and arduous task of making sure:

- the Visitors Center is staffed by volunteers 363 days a year,
- keeping track of each individuals' hours and contributions for reporting to Fish and Wildlife Service headquarters, and giving credit to the volunteers for their contributions,
- making sure sufficient volunteers are available for tours, and projects on the right day, and at the right time,
- scheduling replacements when the original volunteer has a conflict,
- recruiting new volunteers, and
- serving as a clearinghouse for volunteer information.

With a volunteer membership of over 800 and a regular volunteer base of over 100 individuals, clearly this would be a job description for a full-time employee. However, neither Blackwater Refuge nor the Friends of Blackwater have an employee to handle these duties. These duties are handled by Maggie Briggs the refuge Outdoor Recreation Planner in addition to her regular duties, and several volunteer "Volunteer Coordinators". Maggie and the volunteering coordinators have done a tremendous job managing this task. But we would like the refuge to have a position available to handle the job, which will only grow in value, as we undertake more and more refuge projects and refuge support activities. It would also free up Maggie to plan and conduct additional interpretive and educational activities, which would make Backwater's outdoor programs even more valuable to the public.

H.R. 2408 is an important piece of legislation for the refuge system. It continues the funding for Volunteer Coordinators hired since 1998 on those few refuges that were given a Volunteer Coordinator staff position. This is good. However, I strongly urge you to consider expanding the act to provide funding for more Volunteer Coordinators, and make the funding available for additional full-time or part-time positions, in order to provide more refuges with this critically needed support.

Funding more Volunteer Coordinators would mean more refuges could leverage the expense many times over by getting the volunteers needed to manage, conduct, and support refuge educational programs, projects and maintenance. We all know the Fish and Wildlife Service and the Wildlife Refuge System have limited budgets and more tasks than their budgets can handle. However, across the nation there are thousands of people with an infinite variety of skills that are willing to volunteer their time and expertise to the Refuge System if there were someone to coordinate those activities.

We constantly receive requests from people who want to volunteer a few hours or days a week or a month, or who want to work on a particular project, or who have a particular skill or interest. However, the task of managing those requests in addition to the current volunteer activities is too much for one person to handle "in addition to their full time job".

We do everything we can to accommodate these volunteer requests since we do not want any volunteer to go somewhere else. However, if we had a full time Volunteer Coordinator we could do so much more.

My point is this. If we at Blackwater, in a small rural community with a population of just over 30,000 are in a position of not being able to handle the volunteers that come to us, I am certain there are many, many refuges across the country in the same position. Which means the valuable resources of many, many "Volunteers" for the refuge system are not serving the refuge system or are going somewhere else to volunteer. The bottom line is the refuge system is missing out on valuable volunteer talents and expertise that are there, and are free for the asking.

While most of our volunteers are from the Eastern Shore, we have volunteers who regularly come from D.C., Baltimore, the rest of Maryland, Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Virginia. The public's love with and excitement for the Nation's Refuge system is a tremendous asset. It can be leveraged, and one of the best tools to do that is with Volunteer Coordinators. I encourage you to pass this bill, with additional funding for more coordinators.

Before I close I would like to acknowledge the support and encouragement the Friends of Blackwater receives from the management and staff of the Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge. Glenn Carowan the Refuge Manager, Maggie Briggs the Outdoor Recreational Planner, and the entire staff of the refuge are truly our partners. We love what we do, and it would not be possible without the management and staff support we receive from the refuge.

Thank you and I would be glad to answer any questions.